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ABSTRACT

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, a 20th century Russian linguist and literacy critic, texts represent battlegrounds for competing voices, including the author's, the narrator's, and the characters'. This concept of "heteroglossia" can be applied to a short story such as Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," about the--as it turns out, hallucinatory--escape from execution of a Southern sympathizer named Peyton Farquhar during the Civil War. College students were asked to identify the various voices they heard in the text, according to Bakhtin's scheme. Bierce's story lends itself well to such a task, since it is divided into three sections, each of which has a distinctive predominant voice. In the first section, the dominant voice is that of the formal, military establishment, while in the third section, it is desperate and unreliable, reflecting Farquhar's racing thoughts and frantic clinging to life, while at the same time hinting at something dreamlike and unreal. Less easy to identify is the voice prevalent in the second section which expresses the romanticized view of military life that led Farquhar to become involved in the war to begin with. The juxtaposition of the three distinctive voices gives the story the added dimension of an indictment of a romanticized view of war. Further, the voices in the story are readily recognizable, and students can extend their observations about competing voices to include thematic concerns. A more complex use of Bakhtin's theory developed through the discussion as students began to identify the social forces behind the voices they identified. The film version of the story is also interesting because, while it contains almost no spoken dialogue, it is still possible to identify voices. Using the film in conjunction with the story can be instructive. Both versions can be connected to Bakhtin's ideas, thus highlighting a dimension of the story that is certainly there but not often emphasized. (HB)

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Using Bakhtin's Competing Voices to Interpret "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"

I'm assuming that everyone is familiar with Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," a story that is frequently anthologized and often used in Composition and Literature courses. The story ostensibly recounts the escape from execution of a Southern sympathizer during the Civil War. As the story opens, Peyton Farquhar is about to be hanged from the timbers of Owl Creek bridge. He appears to make a dramatic escape when the rope breaks and he plunges into the river below. Only at the very end of the story is it revealed that Farquhar's escape is really a dream or hallucination, occurring in the space of the few seconds before he dies at the end of the rope, which did not, in fact, break.

If students have read the story before, they are not surprised by the ending; if they haven't, they're temporarily fooled into believing that Farquhar has actually escaped, so the ending comes as a surprise. However, a re-examination of the story reveals a number of ambiguous passages that sound normal in the flow of narrative about Farquhar's escape, but can also depict the actual horrors of dying at the end of a rope. In

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these ambiguous passages, Bierce's narrator makes a point about the relativity of time and about how people tend to take for granted the valuable things in life until threatened with their removal. These two themes, the fluid nature of time and the value of things often taken for granted, are clear, and students usually have no problem seeing them. However, if the story is examined from a different perspective, an additional theme emerges.

The last time I taught the story, I introduced Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of competing voices to my students, and I then asked them to listen for these voices in the story as they read it. According to Bakhtin, a twentieth century Russian linguist and literary critic, texts represent battlegrounds for competing voices, including the author's, the narrator's, and the characters' (262-263). Best seen in the novel, this concept of <u>heteroglossia</u> can also be applied to the short story. Although Bakhtin argues that these voices represent various social positions in conflict with each other, I did not at first intend to include this aspect of his theory when I presented it to my students. I concentrated instead on the more immediate task of getting them to identify the voices that they heard in the text. As a way of getting them to pay more attention to language than they normally do, I asked them to examine the language of the story closely, looking for specific linguistic evidence that could be used to answer the question, Who is speaking here?

Bierce's story lends itself well to this approach because it

is divided into three clearly marked sections, each of which has a distinctive predominant voice, despite the fact that the same third person narrator remains constant throughout. My students had little difficulty identifying two voices: the rigid, impartial voice of Section I, where the cold formalities of Farquhar's hanging are presented, and the desperate, alternately joyous and terrified voice of Section III, where Farquhar's imagined escape is presented. They could not as easily identify the voice of Section II, where the incident prompting Farquhar's entry into the war is presented.

The predominant voice of Section I is that of the formal, military establishment. It is cool and rigid in tone as it presents the details of Farquhar's impending execution. "A man stood upon a railroad bridge in northern Alabama, looking down into the swift water twenty feet below. The man's hands were behind his back, the wrists bound with a cord. A rope closely encircled his neck. It was attached to a stout cross-timber above his head and the slack fell to the level of his knees" (66). And a little later, "Excepting the group of four at the center of the bridge, not a man moved. The company faced the bridge, staring stonily, motionless. The sentinels, facing the banks of the stream, might have been statues to adorn the bridge. The captain stood with folded arms, silent, observing the work of his subordinates, but making no sign" (66). In addition to such details, the voice of Section I offers observations such as, "Death is a dignitary who when he comes announced is to be

received with formal manifestations of respect, even by those most familiar with him. In the code of military etiquette silence and fixity are forms of deference" (66), and "The liberal military code makes provision for hanging many kinds of person, and gentlemen are not excluded" (67). Towards the end of Section I, we begin to hear another voice--Farquhar's own--as he watches a piece of driftwood move unnaturally slow down the current of the stream, and as he hears the ticking of his watch, which he at first cannot recognize.

The dominant voice of Section III is desperate and unreliable. Everything seems to happen very quickly in this section of the story, and even the rhythm of the language reflects Farquhar's desperately racing thoughts and his desire to cling to life. He is elated by his ability to free himself of his bonds and duck all the bullets fired at him. In addition, he sees the world as he has never seen it before: "He looked at the forest on the bank of the stream, saw the individual trees, the leaves and the veining of each leaf--saw the very insects upon them: the locusts, the brilliant-bodied flies, the gray spiders stretching their webs from twig to twig. He noted the prismatic colors in all the dewdrops upon a million blades of grass" (70). At the same time, however, the voice of Section III presents information that makes no sense. Farquhar's senses become "preternaturally keen." He notes the color of a distant marksman's eye; he sees bullets flattened as they strike the water; and he falls alsleep while walking. Both aspects of this

voice--its desperation and is lack of logic--suggest that it is the voice of Farquhar's dream or hallucination. It occurs in some inner landscape, unlike the execution of Section I, which occurs in an outer landscape defined by the realities of space and time. The objective voice of Section I intrudes only once in Section III. At the very end of Farquhar's dream, as he runs to embrace his wife, he "feels a stunning blow upon the back of his neck; a blinding white light blazes all about him with a sound like the shock of a cannon--then all is darkness and silence! Peyton Farquhar was dead; his body, with a broken neck, swung gently from side to side beneath the timbers of the Owl Creek bridge" (72).

My students had little trouble differentiating between the voices of Section I and Section III. However, they did not as easily hear the voice of Section II, a rather odd intrusion that comes between the sergeant's stepping aside to let Farquhar drop at the very end of Section I and Farquhar's actual fall at the beginning of Section III. Section II flashes back to the incident that prompted Farquhar to become involved in the war even though he was not a soldier. The language used in this section to describe things connected with the military is markedly different from the language of Section I. The reader now hears what must be Farquhar's notions about "gallant armies" (68), "the larger life of the soldier" (68), and "opportunity for distinction" (68). The narrator says of Farquhar, "No service was too humble for him to perform in aid of the South, no

adventure too perilous for him to undertake if consistent with the character of a civilian who was at heart a soldier" (68). This third voice, which offers a romanticized view of military life, reflects Farquhar's view before his real experiences of war, including capture and summary sentencing. It presents Farquhar as someone prone to dreaminess and unrealistic romanticizing, someone whose wife serves water to a passing soldier "with her own white hands" (68). The reader also learns that Farquhar has been duped, since the man who delivers the information about Owl Creek Bridge, we learn, is a Federal scout. This knowledge, presented objectively at the very end of Section II, reinforces the reader's impression of Farquhar as someone who is out of touch with reality.

The juxtaposition of these three voices--the realistic military, the romanticized military, and the desperate, dreamy one--gives the story an added dimension. The story can now be seen as an indictment of an overly romanticized view of war. Even Farquhar's realization, as he dreams his escape, that life is more elemental and wondrous than any military distinction could make it reinforces the message that war is neither gallant nor romantic, and that the common man can be destroyed by its realities or its illusions alike.

Bierce's story is particularly good for use with Bakhtin's ideas because the voices in it are readily recognizable, and because students can easily extend their observations about competing voices to include thematic concerns. In other words,

when they are asked to consider what messages Bierce conveys by way of the voices he creates, they approach a more complex use of Bakhtin's theory than I initially considered using, one that includes some awareness of the social forces behind the voices they identify. As I said earlier, initially, my goal in using the the concept of competing voices was to get my students to pay more attention to the language of the story. However, because voices are tied to groups as well as individuals, it made perfect sense to include some discussion of the social forces behind the voices. Although I had not planned to include this social dimension of Bakhtin's idea, with this story it seemed impossible to ignore, because the voices that students identified clearly reflect social forces in obvious conflict with each other--the rigidly impersonal military, the romanticized military, and the individual who is victim of both in the end.

The film version of the story is interesting because it contains almost no spoken dialogue. The text is predominantly visual. However, it is still possible to identify voices. The formal military voice of Section I and the desperate voice of Section III are apparent in what is happening. But the voice of Section II is missing. There is nothing in the film about Farquhar's decision to enter the war nor anything about his notions of the military when he made that decision. Clearly the film loses something in Bakhtinian terms. But using the film in conjunction with the story can be instructive. First, students can learn something about the differences between the medium of

written language and the medium of film. They can consider the question, how would the filmmaker have had to change the film in order to include the voice of Section II? Is it possible to do so and still preserve the film's coherence and unity? Or would it become a different film? Second, the film has the capacity to present more than one voice at a time--visually--as when we see Farquhar swimming desperately away while the soldiers on shore follow orders and fire in an attempt to stop him. The film's capacity to present more than one voice at a time underscores the concept of voices in conflict. It is obvious who is against whom. What we need to do then is work backwards and ask the question, "What segment of society does each side in the conflict represent?" Thus, both the written and the visual versions of the story can be used in connection with Bakhtin's idea to see a dimension of the story that is certainly there but not often emphasized.

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